Brian Welch, NASA director of Media Services and former *Roundup* editor, dies

Brian D. Welch, former JSC public affairs officer and NASA's Director of Media Services, died Friday, November 24, after suffering a heart attack.

Welch is well known throughout the JSC community as the longtime editor for the *Space News Roundup* in the 1980s. For eight years, Welch oversaw the publication and was noted for his in-depth commentaries.

"When I became Director of JSC, our major activity was to return the shuttle to safe flight following the *Challenger* accident," said former JSC Director Aaron Cohen. "There were many demands placed on me to give speeches to explain our activities to reach that goal. I needed someone who could put all the information in the right context, and I turned to the Public Affairs Office for help. Brian Welch emerged as the person I counted on time and time again. I will always treasure the many hours I spent working with Brian."

In 1984, Welch became a public affairs mission commentator, providing real-time descriptions from the Mission Control Center during space shuttle flights. He also served as Deputy News Chief at the center, manager of the JSC mission commentary team and newsroom manager during shuttle flights.

"Brian was one of the most dedicated, intense, fervent lovers of America's space program and of the principles and purposes of journalism," said Rob Navias, chief, Mission Planning and Integration Office. "He was a consummate professional whose loss will be felt forever."

He served ten months at NASA Headquarters as speechwriter for NASA Administrator Daniel S. Goldin, before being appointed Chief of News and Information in 1994. Welch was named Director of Media Services in 1998.

"All of us at NASA are stunned and saddened by this tragic loss," said Goldin. "Brian's love and enthusiasm for space flight and exploration was infectious. He approached his job with a passion and a purpose and truly embodied the spirit of this agency."

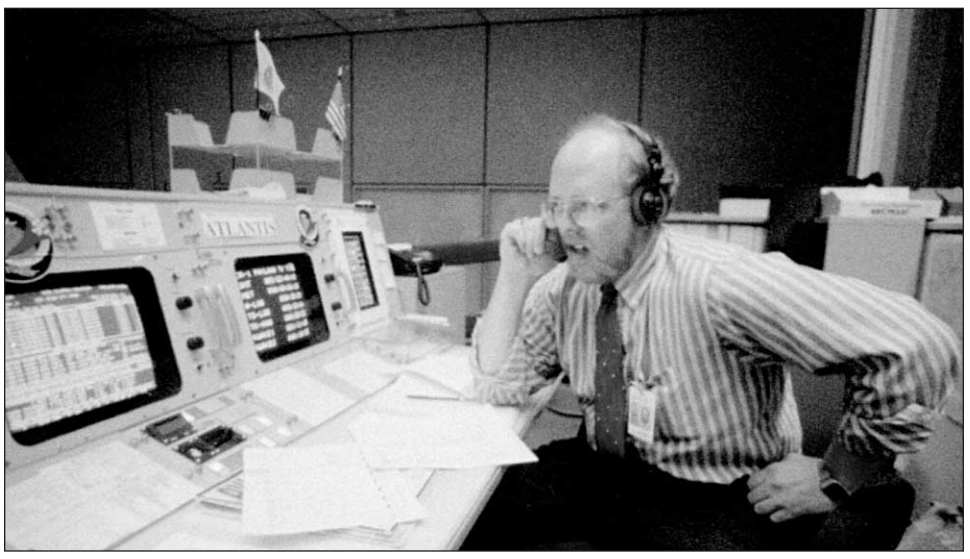
As Director of Media Services, Welch led many of the agency's public outreach efforts. He was responsible for overall agency news operations, NASA Television and the agency's Internet efforts.

Welch began his NASA career as a cooperative education student at the Langley Research Center, Hampton, VA, in 1979. He was a graduate of Murray State University, Murray, KY, and a native of Fulton, KY. His mother, one brother and one sister survive him. ■

In Welch's memory, we have reprinted one of his commentary pieces as taken from the *Roundup*'s commemorative 25th Anniversary issue – September 30, 1983.

JSC Origins…and the future

By Brian Welch



NASA JSC Photo S45 (S) 123

Brian Welch 1958 - 2000

The trees are taller now, more stately, and though battered and thinned by the hurricane of '83, they will in 10 or 20 years stretch out over the grounds of the Johnson Space Center with a lordly, leafy reach reminiscent of Langley, where it all began.

When Robert Gilruth made his first visit to the shores of Clear Lake, however, the area had just been scrubbed clean by Hurricane Carla, and he can be forgiven if a grim sort of feeling welled up in the pit of his stomach as he imagined the vast investment ahead. Out of a flat cow pasture, a space center would rise, and for his people back at the Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia, a move was looming which would radically alter their daily lives.

Gilruth had flown to Houston from Langley that September in 1961 to look over the new site. Back at Langley, the time for being built from scratch had come just after World War 1, when the lower Virginia peninsula was one big military base from Williamsburg to Norfolk. By the time the National Aeronautics and Space Administration was created in 1958, Langley had been a part of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) for close to 50 years. It was NACA's prime aeronautical research facility at the time, but in 1958 all of that had been ceded to NASA. Langley had a long and distinguished history. It is said that hardly an airplane flies today that in some way or another has not been influenced by what was done at Langley. It was where the NASA story really began, and the tall hardwoods and Virginia pines which shaded its grounds gave it an air of permanence and stability. Moreover, it was the first home of the Space Task Group.

This new site, however, was different. It was a flat cow pasture scoured by brisk winds off Galveston Bay. A very large effort would be required to turn it into the new flagship facility of a new age of exploration. But then, big plans were being made, and in the tenor of the times a construction project even of this magnitude paled in comparison with striking out for the Moon.

It was altogether clear on May 25, 1961, the day President Kennedy committed the United States to a race for a Moon landing before the decade was out, that a staggering job had been dumped in NASA's lap. "Now how the hell are we going to do that?" one NASA engineer asked a colleague as they sat contemplating the speech in a quiet office at Langley.

It was a good question, and the man who ended up answering that and many others was Gilruth. A highly respected technical manager, Gilruth had become head of the Space Task Group, the nucleus of what would eventually become a team of 400,000 people. His job soon took on immense proportions. Hundreds of decisions were needed immediately, if not yesterday, and even as the pace quickened, it also became institutionalized for a period of several years. It never let up, not for a long time.

One of the decisions Gilruth and others in NASA faced was what to do with the Space Task Group. It was growing daily, the job ahead was monumental, and the normal quiet routine of Langley was beginning to groan under the strain. New facilities would be needed, and the construction alone would rival that of many projects America had undertaken in the past. Aside from manufacturing plants, assembly buildings, test stands, shipping facilities and launch pads, the Agency would need new laboratories, office buildings, aircraft hangars and huge warehouses, and the Space Task Group would need a home.

Even before it was built, they called it the Manned Spacecraft Center, and from the beginning it was seen as the crown jewel of the new effort, the lead center for all space journeys involving astronauts. But where to put it? As government decisions go, the answer came quickly.

On July 7, 1961, NASA Administrator James E. Webb directed the establishment of preliminary site criteria and a site selection team. Essential criteria for the new site included the availability of water transport and a first-class all-weather airport, proximity to a major telecommunications network, a well established pool of industrial and contractor support, a local utility system capable of delivering 80,000 KVA of reliable power, a readily available supply of water on the order of two million liters per day, a mild climate permitting year-round outdoor work, a culturally attractive community and at least four square kilometers to build on. By August, some 23 sites had been selected as possibilities, including Jacksonville, Miami, Baton Rouge, Corpus Christi, San Diego and San Francisco. Houston was initially included by virtue of the San Jacinto Ordinance Depot, since military rather than commercial facilities were judged best for helping handle NASA's large retinue of jets and specialized equipment. After a visit, however, the selection team agreed that a piece of property owned by Rice University, with its proximity to Ellington Air Force Base, was equally attractive, and on September 19, 1961, that site was chosen. Just the day before, Houston's population had topped the one million mark.

The city was ecstatic. Space fever promptly swept the town. The baseball team was named the Astros, and the basketball team was called the Rockets. The Astrodome, Astroworld and countless businesses with "space city" somewhere in the title blossomed over the years.

It was an enraptured crowd of almost 1,000 then that greeted Gilruth on his second visit to Houston in December 1961. Speaking at the Shamrock Hilton (the interior of which once caused the architect Frank Lloyd Wright to murmur, "I always wondered what the inside of a juke box looked like."), Gilruth announced that a second manned space flight program would occupy the staff of the new space center. The new program would bridge the gap between the early Mercury flights and the later missions to the Moon. He described a half-billion-dollar program to perfect orbital rendezvous techniques using a two-man capsule launched by a derivative of the Air Force's Titan II booster. The project was called Advanced Mercury, Mercury Mark II or simply Mark II, depending on who was asked. Later, they would call it Gemini.

So it was that in July 1961, the directive had come to find a home for the Space Task Group. That date is altogether fitting, since by some strange quirk of history, a great many of the central events in the NASA story have occurred in the month of July.

There was, for example, the signing in July 1958 of Public Law 85-568, the National Air and Space Act, by which President Eisenhower approved the creation of NASA. Eleven years later, in 1969, Apollo 11 landed two men on the Moon in July and the name Houston became the first word uttered from the surface of another planetary body. In July 1972, as NASA turned its attention toward pumping new technology into the private sector, the first of the highly important Landsat Earth observation satellites was launched. Three years later, in July 1975, Americans and Soviets met in space during the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project. One July later, in 1976, the Viking 1 lander became the first probe to touch down on the surface of Mars. In July 1979, during the troubled months when NASA and the Johnson Space Center were dealing with widespread criticism of the Space Shuttle Program, Skylab reentered the atmosphere to a crescendo of bad publicity.

NASA took a drubbing in the media during that July, but things got brighter in July of 1982, when the Shuttle *Columbia* completed her fourth test flight and officially opened a new era of space transportation. That July Fourth will probably always stand out in the minds of many who work at JSC. It was a proud day. Flags festooned Mission Control, and that afternoon the new orbiter, *Challenger*, visited the Clear Lake area with a stopover at Ellington Air Force Base. But it was a July Fourth exactly 20 years earlier, which probably made the biggest impression on the Houston area. That was the day the astronauts came to town.

They were the Original Seven, the chosen, the first of a new breed of explorers, and in the early 1960s there were few celebrities on the planet who could compare with them. When they made their first trip to Houston on July 4, 1962, all the stops were pulled out. They were given a motorcade along a route lined with cheering admirers. Speeches were made, the welcoming ceremony was pure Texan, and a vast barbeque was thrown in their honor at the Houston Coliseum.

Today there are almost 80 active astronauts living in the Clear Lake area. They still command a lot of attention, but the tours which used to bring citizens out to tramp about on their lawns and ask to pose with their wives and children have long since stopped.

These days, after 20 years of becoming accustomed to astronauts, Houston takes less notice of them. The new generation of space explorers marry, raise children, go to movies and restaurants, shop in the malls, go to baseball games and every once in awhile they take a trip into orbit. Most people don't even recognize the vast majority of them anymore, much less ask for autographs. And there is a certain significance to this, satisfying to the people at NASA – it means they've done their jobs well. Space flight has matured, it has become a routine – if still spectacular business, and it promises to become more routine in the future.

And if a sense of the ordinary becomes a part of space flight, it will be because an enormous number of people are flying routinely in space. It will be because Shuttle flights take off every week or so, and because scientists and engineers and specialists of all kinds are living and working in space. In the next decade or so, the Johnson Space Center will probably be very heavily involved in the construction of a space station in low Earth orbit. NASA sees this as the next logical step and proposes to have construction underway by the early 1990s. In some ways, that will be analogous to the construction of JSC here some 20 years ago.

As with JSC, one of the items under construction will be a mission control center. With the advent of a space station, more complex orbital operations will begin, requiring some kind of control center in orbit, many believe. This orbital complex probably will also include scientific laboratories, living quarters, and repair and construction facilities. It won't be close to Clear Lake and the salty breezes, but there will be all of the world's oceans to look out on.

And in 20 or 50 years, when the trees at the Johnson Space Center have finally grown to maturity and arc out over the roads and walkways, they may even plant a few more… up there. ■